

Mapping Out *Patience*: Cartography, Cinema, and W.G. Sebald

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Abstract. The documentary film *Patience (After Sebald)* by Grant Gee (2001) follows in the footsteps of W.G. Sebald and his walking tour of Suffolk, England, as described in his book *The Rings of Saturn* (1998). A variety of strategies in cinematic cartography are used quite consciously in Gee's exploration of space, place and story. Using Teresa Castro's three cartographic shapes of cinema, I structure an analysis of the film's opening scene through a discussion of cinematic cartography, or the plotting of places onto a map, as well as what I will differentiate as cartographic cinema, or the mapping of space through the cinematographic image. I argue that cinema can be an especially powerful and necessary cartographic tool to record and reconstruct narratives, emotions, memories and histories, which are necessary for a deep understanding of the world and our place in it.

Keywords: Cinematic cartography, cartographic cinema, narratives

1. Introduction

In his book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), Michel de Certeau describes the changing function of the map over time as moving from the marking out of itineraries ("performative indications chiefly concerning pilgrimages") to the colonization of space (p. 120). He suggests that the map has now become an authority on place where there are sets of rules and plans, streets and architecture, places of interest, whereas the itinerary, which is the narrative, the context, and the human perspective, is becoming lost. Indeed, with the advent of Virtual Globes and GIS services such as Google Maps, where the entire earth is being mapped in detail, de Certeau's observation may be more relevant than ever. Places that hold no meaning to us are simply abstract points on a map if there is no narrative, no human perspective, and no itinerary.

One way of relating the itinerary back into the map is through cinema. As Sébastien Caquard (2009) notes, the deep understanding of places in everyday geography is highly related to experiences, memories, emotions,

perceptions and images. The diversity and power of cinematic approaches to evoke these emotional, political and personal dimensions contrasts with the scarcity of those dimensions in cartographic practices. Thus, a synthesis of cartographic cinema practice is necessary.

A recent film *Patience (After Sebald)* by Grant Gee (2011) demonstrates this synthesis by using both the map and the itinerary as frameworks for a cinematic exploration. *Patience* literally follows in the footsteps of writer W.G. Sebald, in modes of film essay / biography / landscape documentary, by tracing the same path described in Sebald's literary work *The Rings of Saturn* (1998). Elements in *Patience* take off from cinematic cartography, showing the locations of Sebald's walking tour of Suffolk, England, as well as the locations mentioned in the spiralling and divergent narrative, as plotted out on Google Maps. Cartographic cinema, or the mapping of space through cinematography, is also a strong theme in the film. This documentary is perhaps the first to relate different modes of cinematic cartography together quite consciously. In fact, Director Grant Gee studied Geography and even has one year towards a Ph.D. in the field (Harris, 2011). He has undoubtedly read – and even interviews in the film – some of the same writers that I draw upon in my analysis (Robert Macfarlane, for instance). Cinematic cartography is a rapidly growing subfield of study, as evidenced by a plethora of books recently published on the subject (see for example Conley 2007, Lukinbeal & Zimmerman 2008, Koeck & Roberts 2010, Penz & Lu 2011, Rhodes & Gorfinkel 2011).

Teresa Castro, in her essay “The Mapping Impulse” (2009), shows how filmmakers and cartographers are closely related through their attempts in visualizing the world. She identifies three cartographic shapes that are present in cinema: the aerial view, the panorama, and the atlas. Through Castro's cartographic shapes, I propose to trace some of the functions and tropes of narrative cartography and its relation to cartographic cinema, as they are used in *Patience (After Sebald)*. I argue that a variety of cinematic and cartographic strategies are necessary to have a deep understanding of the world and our place in it. And finally, I suggest that cartographic cinema is especially important in relating the itinerary back into the map.

2. Cinematic Cartography and the Mapping of Place

Maps have appeared in films since the earliest days of cinema, providing locational grounding to lend realism to the narrative, whether documentary or fiction. However, it is only more recently that cartography has included the practice of plotting a film's locations on a map; narrative cartography, of

which cinematic cartography is a part, also considers novels, dramas, and indeed, any kind of narrative.

The very first image that we see in *Patience (After Sebald)* is a Google Map with placemarkers and lines stretching out all over the world. We begin to zoom in to England, where the majority of placemarkers are found, to the sound of birds and the crack of a rifle. We keep zooming in, jump cuts simulating the redrawing of the computer screen that happens in Google Maps. We begin to make out details in the satellite images of the land. As buildings and roads take shape, a placemaker pops up, reading "Norwich." Actor Jonathan Pryce begins to read the opening paragraphs of *The Rings of Saturn*, by W.G. Sebald. We see the title page from the book, and the page from which Jonathan Pryce is reading.

Barbara Hui, writer and creator of the Litmap project, is one of the interviewees in *Patience*, and it is her Google Maps mash-up that opens the film. Since Sebald's book is full of geography, in that almost every page mentions a geographic place, Hui came up with the simple idea of actually plotting each place, using the Google Maps Application Programming Interface (API) tool. *The Rings of Saturn* was the first book that she plotted. Hui uses the colour red on the map to indicate places from Sebald's actual walking tour, with links out to the places that he mentions as his thoughts are roaming. The use of the Google Map imagery brings in an explicit spatial dimension to the analysis. We are able to see the lay of the land, the distances involved, how things are in relation to each other. We know the shape of the coastlines, the topography, the outline of the journey, all extremely helpful things in setting a film or any other kind of narrative.

The Google satellite view corresponds with Castro's aerial view, in that both strive through photographic means to make accurate plans of the land, with exact positions and distances. The satellite view adds another layer of meaning, with its scientific presentation, and gives us an understanding of the global positioning, as well as the pleasure of seeing the Earth from an exotic, and in fact, impossible angle. It places a grid upon a place, so that anything can be found according to exact coordinates, thus, the term "grid map" as advanced by writer Robert Macfarlane. There have been incredible advances and benefits made possible by grid maps, but while they are powerful tools, as Macfarlane (2007) points out, "their virtue is also their danger: that they reduce the world only to data, that they record space independent of being" (p. 141-143). Macfarlane's view of the grid correspond to de Certeau's view of the map as an authoritative system describing places as an exhibition of knowledge, and through scientific discourse and geometry, erases the practices that produce the map (1984, p. 121). Thus, it is not through cinematic cartography, but cartographic cinema, that one can

record the practices of mapping and the space of being, as we shall see in the next section.

3. Cartographic Cinema and the Mapping of Space

From the digital grid map in the opening shots of *Patience*, we move to a long tracking shot of an East Anglia train, which we would infer (if we are following along with book in hand) is leaving from Norwich, bound for Somerleyton Hall, Sebald's first stop. The film moves from the satellite map of the world down to the street level point of view on the train station, encapsulating the movement to the second of the three "cartographic shapes" of the film. A beautiful black and white extended tracking shot travels the length of a train, the words "East Anglia" on the sides of the coaches, giving way to travelling shots from the train, of the tracks and the countryside.

These long horizontal tracking shots correspond to Castro's panorama shape, which she describes as responding to "a desire to embrace and to circumscribe space, allowing for the observer's eye to seize the whole of an image" (p. 11). She refers to early cinema's penchant for capturing views and landscapes that represented "the careful scaling and coding of the world through filmic means, namely, horizontal and 360° panoramic shots" (p. 12). While there are few actual panorama shots in *Patience* (that is, where the camera turns or pans around, rotating on a tripod axis), there are numerous horizontal tracking shots that guide the spectator through time and space. Even when there is no camera movement, the landscapes that Gee films with his 16mm Bolex invite the connection to 18th and 19th century panoramic paintings and the spectacularization of landscape that occurred, as well as the associated longing for immersion in and mastery over space. At the same time, the landscape shots record the space of being, that is, a more human point of view, which provides a counterbalance to the overhead grid map.

The difference between the panoramic landscape and the aerial or satellite grid corresponds to de Certeau's differentiation between the tour and the map. If the aerial view is incorporated by the map as the knowledge of order, the totalizing tableau of place, then the tour is the speech-act, narration, and the first human attempts at representing space through story. On this more human scale of the panorama, we find the possibility for story that gives the landscape meaning. De Certeau's tour can be correlated to Robert Macfarlane's discussion of what he terms "story maps," defined in opposition to grid maps as "forms of spatial expressions that embody our personal experiences of the environment and contribute to creating a deep

understanding of places” (2007, p. 142). They include representations of places through records of journeys organized by the passage of the traveller, and the perimeters of that experience. Events and places are often not fully distinguishable, as they are seen as the same material. Indeed, the earliest maps, in the very broadest sense, were story maps. These maps were oral cartographies and histories, describing not only features of the landscape but what had occurred there. These story maps were passed on through generations (p. 141). *Patience* is, in many ways, about the relationship between the map and the tour, and the need for narrative and meaning that is made possible through montage, as the next section will explore.

4. The Atlas as Montage and Meaning

Immediately after the film’s opening sequence that sets up the mapping discourse, Gee introduces the first explicit connection between a place in the book and a place in the film. This is Somerleyton Station, where Sebald (and Gee) gets off the train. The reference in the book is given to us on the screen, along with a small rectangle of colour (of a man walking alongside a departing train, whom we might assume to be the filmmaker) superimposed upon a background of grainy black and white field. Gee’s various visual strategies such as this superimposition, as well as the use of montage in general to organize images thematically, can be seen to correspond to the atlas as a cartographic shape. Castro’s atlas refers not only to a collection or archive of images that aim to convey geographical knowledge as well as history, but also “a means to organize visual knowledge. In other words, atlases refer as much to a strictly cartographic instrument as to a graphical means for the assemblage and combination – if not montage – of images” (2009, p. 13).

The editing of landscape scenes in *Patience* often functions as assemblages and combinations that aim to convey geographical information as well as dual points of view. For instance, the black and white landscape footage is often presented to illustrate Sebald’s words, while the smaller rectangle alludes to filmmaker’s experience of the same landscape through a handheld camera point of view, often of his walking feet. Elsewhere, montages of cliffs, beaches, or moors give evidence of an atlas-view towards conveying different parts of a landscape. The atlas also organizes, or edits, these cinematographic views into sequences that tell stories.

For instance, at Somerleyton Hall, Sebald’s first stop on his walking tour, we learn of Sebald’s chance meeting with a gardener, who, upon learning that Sebald is German, tells him about the planes setting out from the 67 airfields in East Anglia to attack Germany. Over this, we see aerial footage

from the East Anglian Film Archive projected on a screen, shot from planes dropping bombs onto a large target painted in white lines on a green field. This is the aerial view in the original usage of the term, which as Castro points out was associated with war and military operations. This scene does several things. It introduces the themes of war and death that are prevalent in much of Sebald's work, it visually illustrates the irradiating melancholy and its impact upon the landscape – an emotional mapping – and also tells both a history of the area and a story of an encounter with a local, a chance meeting on the pilgrimage. It works not only to relate the different cartographic shapes together in exploring a single place, but also to emphasize the importance of the itinerary in relation to the map. In this depiction of East Anglia, the Second World War can be read as part of the landscape, but requires narrative and the human dimension to be fully accessible. Gee's montage of images and the trope of "screen projection" to connote archival imagery play in concert with Sebald's telling of a story to make emotional and historical meaning of the place. East Anglia now means something more to us than it did before, when it was simply a point on a map.

5. Conclusion

Castro's cartographic shapes prove useful as a framework for exploring the visual relationships between cinema and mapping. The aerial view acts as a way of ordering place, in a similar way that the map itself exhibits place. It displays knowledge from an overhead view. It is easy to forget the human perspective, especially in a wartime context. The panoramic view opens up the possibility of movement through a spectacularized, yet more human perspective. The cinematographic image functions to map the space of being. And finally, the atlas view, through montage, functions to organize these images into thematic explorations.

These are tools for the mapping impulse to describe space visually, and to open the way for the tour, for emotion, (auto)biography and history, which complete the picture. Sebald's narratives, in conveying the experience of feeling both liberated and despondent whilst moving through the landscape, often touches off from a chance encounter, a particular place or the history of that place, to spiral out into something else, an encyclopedia of people and things that he is interested in. Gee replicates Sebald's strategy, using a combination of the atlas, the panorama, and the aerial view, to give various layers of geographical knowledge, from topography and location to distance and point of view. In combination, the beautiful landscape shots and associated stories make us want to see these places, and the grid map

enables us to replicate the journey ourselves. This is how itineraries are formed.

Itineraries are the framework with which one builds a pilgrimage or a tour. They are simple indications of actions to be taken. Lise Patt, editor of the anthology "Searching for Sebald" and another interviewee in the film, makes note of the "image" in the word "pilgrimage." She points to medieval itinerary maps with images of the pilgrimages for those who did not actually go on the journey. People would use the maps to meditate upon, to move their minds through the different parts of the land, the journey, on the way to Jerusalem. *Patience (After Sebald)* can be thought of as a kind of itinerary map, then, that provides images and stories for those who come afterwards, and for those who can not make the journey. It illustrates the importance of relating the itinerary back into the map through cinema, a cartographic tool that can record and recount the emotional, political and personal dimensions of places for a deeper understanding of the world in which we live.

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